PRIMA DONNAS OF AFRICAN BLOOD

A Recent Development in the Musical World--Some Sing Negro Songs Written by Negro Poets and Set to Music by Negro Composers--Appreciated by White Audiences As Well As by People of Their Own Race.

SISSIERETTA JONES.
THE BLACK PATTI.

CARITA DAY.

ABBIE MITCHELL

HATTIE HOPKINS.

LOTTIE WILLIAMS.

ADA OVERTON WALKER.

MADAME FLOWER.

Come away to Dreamin' Town,
Where the skies don't ever frown,
Where the streets are paved with gold,
Where the sun ain't ever cold
And no sheep stray from the fold,
Mandy Loo.

The song floated in a clear soprano from an open window in a dark West Side street. It was an unusual voice that sang it, rich and full and sweet, not an artificial note in it, yet rising and falling as no untrained voice could—altogether a voice strange to hear in a street of dingy brown houses, far from Broadway, the theatres, and the lights.

The man who was finding out things about New York stopped to listen to it, and the man who knew many queer phases of the city's life and had been showing some of them to him stopped, too.

"That" declared the man who knew New York in its odd corners, "is a negro song, written by a negro poet, set to music by a negro composer, and I guess it is being sung by one of the colored prima donnas. That is a negro clubhouse. They have concerts every other week or so.

"I went to one once. Several of us were there as guests of the man who wrote that song, and I never heard better music in my life. I have thought a good deal about it since, and it has led me to watch a curious development in the theatres, particularly in the vaudeville houses, and to make some inquiries, going back further than my time, about it.

"Come along to Broadway and have a drink, and I'll tell you some of the things I have noticed."

Any one who occasionally passes an hour in the vaudeville theatres cannot fail to have noticed there in the last few years the incursion of the colored singer—not the negro minstrel who sings funny songs and works off many old chestnuts and a few new jokes on a patient and long suffering audience, but the woman singer who sings the songs of her own race and the songs of white people indiscriminately, who enters into competition with the white singers in their own field and certainly does not suffer by comparison.

There are at least a dozen of these colored prima donnas. About the beauty of their voices there has never been any question.

Most of them are almost white—octoroons, quadroons and mulattoes. Some of them are very good looking, too. Seen from the orchestra they are no darker than some Spanish women or some French women, and fairer than many Italians.

Their accent very rarely reveals their race, and their stage presence and dignity is all that could be expected even from white singers of distinction.

Vaudeville audiences know good music and are critical about it even if they do sit patiently and even appreciatively through the inanities of comic songs sung in the tin pan register. If any one has any doubt of this let him go to one of these houses when a real singer drifts there for a week.

He will hear favorite old ballads applauded and encored with a vigor which the comic tin pan soloist never receives. There is no number better received than these songs, which everybody has heard before but likes to hear again.

Now the white vaudeville audiences have received the colored prima donna with open arms. There is now no more popular performer than she.

Where she sang in only one theatre five years ago she sings in fifty now. And where there is one singer of this type there are a dozen now.

She is welcomed in the South as well as in the North. She earns as large a salary as the white singer, and is getting almost as many engagements.

The vogue for coon songs helped her a great deal, but it is quite probable that she could have got along without it. The audiences wanted her before the coon song era, and what the public wants the manager must provide.

Moreover, though at first untrained—born nightingales such as only the negro race produces—these women are now getting good training, singing by note, and continually attempting more and more ambitious songs.

And the race which has provided singers is providing composers. Some of the most popular melodies of recent years have been composed by negroes.

Negroes are furnishing their own managers and gradually making their own productions. The Williams and Walker show, with all its faults, was a stage in this development, and its great financial success was only an indication, so many shrewd watchers of theatrical affairs think, of a turn in the public fancy, a broadening of the public taste.

It was to this development that the man who knew his New York referred. He expatiated on it at length over the chop house table after the song from the open window had turned the talk that way, and he told interesting stories and gave interesting details about it, and some of the women who are promoting the reputation of the colored singer.

"This began," said the man who had been looking it up, "about ten years ago. It was before my time, but I have heard the story scores of times from the people interested.

"A white man named John Isham, who is now dead, was really the first to utilize the musical talent of the race. He organized a company of colored singers and toured the country. It was the first organization of its kind.

"The musical numbers of the troupe combined everything from ragtime to ballads and bits of grand opera. And the new singers took to the operatic selections as a duck does to water.

"They were seemingly more at home singing arias from 'Faust,' Martha,' 'Rigoletto,' 'Aida,' 'Romeo et Juliette,' 'Carmen' and 'Il Trovatore' than the ragtime, and the audiences liked the good music best.

"The public packed the theatres every time the company appeared. Those who came to scoff remained to applaud. Isham inside of four years cleared more than $250,000—and spent it.

"He started several other companies of negro singers and some of them did as well as the original organization. Then some of his singers took to concert work and to the vaudeville stage and the thing was fairly on its way. All that was lacking then was the native composers.

"It was with these troupes that Seleika, Mme. Flower, the Black Patti, Rachael Walker, Marguerite Scott and others of the colored vocalists received their first start. The thrifty ones spent the money they earned in having their voices cultivated. To-day some of them are finished artists. Hear them and you'll realize it.

"Mme. Hyer is looked upon by colored singers of the present generation as the greatest prima donna of her race. She was a soprano of rare quality of voice. They say that her trill equalled the famous trill of Emma Abbott.

"She is fifty-seven now, and is teaching singing out at Sacramento, Cal., where she has a beautiful home. This was Maida Hyer. There were two sisters. One, Louise, is dead now.

"Maida was in her heyday in 1872. She had her first success in the peace jubilee in Boston in that year. The Redpath Bureau, a theatrical agency of that day, organized a show called 'Out of Bondage,' in which she was the leading singer.

"After that she starred in a comic opera called the 'African Princess.' Then they gave 'Pinafore.' Steele Mackaye wrote a comedy called the 'Blackville Twins' for the sisters.

"Later Maida Hyer went to Australia under the management of M. B. Curtis of 'Sam'l of Posen' fame. The last time she sang in public was with Williams and Walker's troupe two seasons ago.

"Of the present generation, the most cultivated and successful is the Black Patti—in private life Mrs. Sissieretta Jones. You must have seen her pictures, at least, on the billboards.

"You could not call her a beauty exactly, but she can sing. She is at the head of her own company, and is reputed to earn between $15,000 and $20,000 a year. She lives in Providence, and the colored folks whisper that she's worth many thousands in real estate and stocks.

"The Black Patti is one of the trained singers. She studied under Mme. Marchesi—just like Melba—and she is more popular in the South than many white singers.

"She began life as a laundress in Cleveland. The young negro she married paid for her musical education. She was one of Isham's singers.

"Another colored singer who is regarded by her race as little short of wonderful is Mme. Seleika. She is an old woman now.

"When Adelina Patti was in her prime and was touring this country she took a fancy to Seleika, and in a way made the colored vocalist her protégée. Patti took her to her home in Craig-y-Nos, and helped her in many ways. She is now teaching singing in Philadelphia.

"You may not know it if you don't go to the vaudeville theatres, but we have a colored nightingale right here in New York who has a wonderful voice. I have heard her sing, and that night the white audience went wild over her voice.

"The colored people call her 'the bronze Melba.' She is Mme. Flower. Her voice is a contralto with a marvellous range.

"They tell me that she is one of the few negro singers who never had much training. She does not read music, and learns her songs by heart. You would never dream this, though, to hear her. She is the best illustration I know of the phenomenon of the singer born

"Then there is a new star I saw not long ago, out in Chicago, who is soon coming here as the prima donna of a vaudeville company. She has had great success out there and she is expected to repeat it here. Her name is Carita Day, and she is the prettiest colored singer on the stage.

"She aspires to emulate Otero, and I don't know whether she dances or sings best. She has a sweet contralto voice. On the stage you would take her for a French woman.

"The youngest of the coming singers is Hattie Hopkins. She is from the South and possesses as sweet a soprano voice as you ever heard in opera.

"Then there is Abbie Mitchell, the wife of Marion Cook, who wrote the music for Williams and Walker's 'In Dahomey,' 'The Southerners,' and some of the best known popular songs that have come out recently. His wife sings her husband's songs principally, and sings them beautifully.

"You could go on with a list of these women who are making large salaries in vaudeville and filling a place on the stage which would have been impossible twenty years or even a decade ago. There is Bella Davis, who is now in Europe, making a pot of money, so the other singers say.

"Then there are Ella Anderson and Lottie Williams and Ada Walker, the wives of the two men who have done more to popularize the productions of colored people than any others I know.

"Only one fault is found with the colored prima donnas by their white managers. They are as capricious as the famous white songbirds, and they have nothing like the business ability of the whites. Promises mean nothing to some of them.

"There are others besides those I have mentioned who have wonderful voices, a handsome stage presence and all that is desired, but they are utterly untrustworthy, and they fail to make the reputation they otherwise would.

"The thing that interests me, though, is where the colored prima donna is going to stop. When you have a race with natural musical ability, far above the white average, why some day won't we have colored prima donnas in grand opera?

"You may laugh, but why not? I talked with a Harvard professor of sociology about it once. I'd like to get Herr Conried's opinion about it, if I dared. To my mind, only the training is needed, and they are getting that. This is what my Harvard professor said about it:

" 'The negro is a natural harmonist. He seems to find the proper harmonies in music, where the white man fails.

" 'For instance, bring half a dozen negro singers together unknown to each other and they will produce excellent music. Yet few of them may know what a theme in music means.

" 'I don't know how far the musical capacity of the race extends. It may lead on to the higher ranges of the art. I think it will. My observation leads me to the conclusion that one of the most interesting experiments that could be essayed would be to train negroes in the musical art.'

"I asked Bob Cole of Cole & Johnson, the most famous colored vaudeville team in the business, and this is what he said:

" 'We folks may sing in grand opera some day, but the day is not ripe yet. There is no manager who has had the nerve yet to take a chance in such a field, and of course the negro himself is not going to take the initiative.

" 'In the first place he hasn't the money, and probably could not get the chance if he had. So far, the public has only demanded that colored singers entertain them in lighter vein.

" 'One of their drawbacks is that few of them really know how to act. They lack the dramatic ability, principally because they have little opportunity to acquire it.

" 'But there are several colored prima donnas who could essay some of the rôles in grand opera and make good in them if they had the opportunity. Their voices, I can say without hesitation, are equal to any on the operatic stage.

" 'They would make wonderful *Carmens*, or *Aidas* or *Selikas*. But somehow you can't imagine a dusky hued *Marguerite* in 'Faust,' can you?

" 'I would like to see it tried—not with a colored organization altogether, but with a white company. May be it will, some day. You can't always tell, you know, for stranger things have happened.'

"And maybe we will," echoed the man whom the colored prima donnas have so impressed. "After I have heard a few such voices as that I heard just now I feel confident we will, and some white people who know of no singers outside of the few white stars whose names are always in the newspapers will make a great discovery."

Is Memory of Faces a Trait of Priests?

"Reading a few days ago some stories of Pope Pius's remarkable memory for faces I was reminded of a couple of priests who had marvellous memories," remarked a member of the Catholic Club. "It set me to wondering if the possession of first rate memories is not one of the characteristics of men of the cloth.

"From my tenth to my fourteenth year I was an altar boy and acolyte in a Catholic Cathedral situated in a small city on the west bank of the Missouri River. About a quarter of a century ago there drifted to this city a noted and eloquent mission priest, a member of one of the great orders. He conducted a mission at the Cathedral, and I was in attendance upon him as acolyte at most of his services for nearly three weeks at that time.

"Two or three days after I began assisting him I noticed that he seemed to be somewhat annoyed over the noise which I undoubtedly made by clomping about the altar in my frost-hardened, copper-toed boots—I was mighty proud of those boots, by the way, because they were the first copper-toed pair I had ever worn.

"I caught the mission priest examining those copper-toed boots of mine rather curiously two or three times, and I felt that they were getting on his nerves. I trod as lightly as I could after that, but, try as I would, I couldn't seem to lessen the noise made by the boots.

"So I asked my mother to get me a pair of carpet slippers to wear at the altar. I told her that the mission priest appeared to be bothered by those noisy boots of mine. She got me a pair of carpet slippers, and I carried them with me to the sacristy and put them on in place of my boots the next time I went to serve the mission priest.

"He quickly noticed the change. He looked down with an approving smile at my feet, and nodded his head amiably. After the service he patted me on the head as I was helping him to remove his vestments in the sacristy, and told me that I was a quick lad to have noticed that the boots were disturbing him.

"That was praise enough for me. I became so attached to that mission priest before he departed for other fields that I hated to see him go.

"About two years ago it was announced at the church which I attend here in New York that this same priest was to hold a mission at the church. I was delighted to hear that, and I determined to go and have a little talk with him as soon as I learned that he had arrived in New York.

"When I got the word that he had arrived I went over to the priests' residence at which he was stopping. I gave my card to the housekeeper and told her I wanted to see the mission priest.

"Presently he came down the stairs, holding my card in one of his hands, and shading his eyes with the other. He had not aged a great deal, although his hair had turned from iron gray to snow white, but he was still the same erect, rosy faced, handsome man whom I had served on the altar as a boy, twenty-five years before.

"He had a puzzled look on his face as he continued to gaze at my card on his way down the stairs. But when he reached the bottom of the stairs he looked up at me with a smile, and it wasn't ten seconds before his smile developed into a smile of recognition. I hadn't said a word, but was just taking his proffered hand, when he amazed me by saying:

"'Ah, here is my little altar lad with the noiseless carpet slippers grown into a man!'

"I think that was an unexampled and almost incredible feat of memory. I was only a small shaver a quarter of a century ago, you'll remember, and there was never anything characteristic about me. I'm just one among a billion in looks.

"But this kindly old priest with the clear mind had me charted before I had a chance to say a word to him. The fact that I have never worn any hair on my face is certainly not enough to account for his marvellous feat in placing me.

"Just six months after that I was crossing the Atlantic, bound for London, on one of the ten day steamers. When I looked over the passenger list on the first day out I saw that one of my fellow voyagers was the Bishop of the Cathedral in the little Western town whom I had frequently served on the altar when an acolyte.

"I waited to get a look at him at the dinner table, and found him not greatly changed—a tall, strapping, fine looking, urbane Bavarian, with the same heavy gold cross attached to his watch chain that I remembered so well, and with the same habit of taking snuff—how well I recall the benign raps he used to bestow upon my head with his snuff box in the sacristy!

"I didn't get an opportunity to present myself to the Bishop immediately after dinner, as I had intended, and so I decided to wait until evening before reintroducing myself to him. After dinner I got into one of those old time ship amusements, still carried on on the slow liners, quoit pitching, with a number of fellows on the forward deck.

"I made a sad hash of it. I seemed to have no judgment whatever of distance, and I was 'way at the bottom of the tally very soon after the game began.

"After twenty minutes of the exercise I gave it up in disgust and somewhat sheepishly joined the group of people watching the pitching. I had no sooner done so than I heard a quiet voice in my ear.

"'You had a better eye than that, my son,' the voice said, 'a quarter of a century or more ago, when you used to bat the ball around the lot near the Cathedral before vespers.'

"I looked up, and there was the Bishop of my acolyte days smiling in my face."